

Science, Darwin and Christianity

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Since the birth of the Enlightenment in the late 17th Century, there has been an ever-widening divide between science and Christianity. I speak specifically of Christianity because not all religions are treated in a similar fashion and it is Christianity in particular that has been the object of criticism from science. When I say science, I mean it in the sense of a discipline and do not confuse it with evolution. So, when I say that science says this or that, I am suggesting a general disposition or action within the discipline of science. This includes both the natural and social sciences, realizing that within the discipline there are always exceptions.

The divide between science and Christianity began by first relegating God to the realm of implausibility and then to the realm of unnecessary. Implausible because there was nothing that transcended experience and unnecessary based on the assumption that the story of evolution confirmed that God was unnecessary to explain the existence of nature. In fact, some would come to claim that the teachings of Christianity were actually a hindrance to explanation of life. That is not to imply, however, that science using the story of evolution single-handedly over-turned the western mind in this matter of the existence of God. It was, however, a major force in this development. While other philosophical factors laid the foundation for the estrangement between Christianity and science, at the end of the day it was the story of evolution that made it acceptable to deny the existence of God. After the publications of *Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man*, science began to speak with increasing confidence that it was now possible to understand man and his universe without God.

It would, however, be unfair to claim that Charles Darwin (whose 200th birthday we celebrate this year) himself was an atheist or an intentional promoter of atheism. The truth is, for much of his life he was a theist and eventually it appears he moved to a position he called agnosticism. In an 1879 (three years before his death) letter to John Fordyce, author of *Works on Scepticism*, Darwin writes:

It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist.— You are right about Kingsley. Asa Gray, the eminent botanist, is another case in point— What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one except myself.— But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates. Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term: which is much too large a subject for a note. In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God.— I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.¹

Darwin's reluctance to venture into giving clear theological answers is revealed in his

¹ <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/content/view/130/125/>. Retrieved March 13, 2009.

reply to a December 13, 1866 letter from Mary Boole in which she wants to know what Darwin's view is regarding that of a God who is a personal and Infinitely good Being.² His reply reveals that Darwin seems to have resisted saying too much about his personal beliefs in God. It does seem, however, that his ideas, if not intentionally encouraging atheism, did support and even promote atheism in the hands of others in the days that followed. Of course, atheism does not need Darwin, as Nietzsche was an atheist and an anti-Darwinian, which seems to suggest that atheism is a philosophical position and not a position demanded by scientific interpretations.

Evolution did, however, in time, increasingly give credibility to those who spoke publicly as if nature was all that existed. I will argue, however, that evidence actually had little to do with the accepted naturalistic claims subsequent to Darwin's publications. In fact, I will argue that the divide between Christianity and science began before Darwin as an epistemological divide that started in the 17th century and, had that divide not occurred, it is doubtful in my mind if evolution would receive the attention that it did.

The divide began innocently enough in the 17th century when Europe found itself in an epistemological crisis or what might be called an epistemological angst. At this time two men in particular had a major influence on the shape of things to come, Francis Bacon and René Descartes. According to Richard Popkin, "Bacon and Descartes both looked for new foundations for the entire intellectual world."³ Of the two, philosophically, Descartes undoubtedly had the major impact on the epistemological development of Europe and beyond. It was Descartes who suggested that religious beliefs were on a different order from all other beliefs. Religious beliefs required no justification as the truth was certified by the Church. On the other hand, all other beliefs must have a sure foundation (an indubitable foundation) built on clear and distinct ideas. He writes, "I revered our theology and aspired as much as anyone else to gain heaven; but having learnt as a certain fact that the path thither is open no less to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which lead to it are beyond our understanding, I would not have dared submit them to my weak powers of reasoning, and, in my opinion, to undertake the examination of them, and succeed, one would need some special grace from heaven and be more than a mere man."⁴ Furthermore he added, "Having thus provided myself with these maxims, and having put them on one side along with the truths of faith, which have always held first place in my belief, I judged that, as for the rest of my opinion, I was free to undertake to divest myself of them"⁵

This laid the epistemological foundation for the eventual divide between Christianity and science. This epistemological divide placed religious knowledge in one circle (so to speak) and science knowledge in another circle. The religious circle spoke only about transcendent matters and the science circle was about nature. This

² <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwinletters/calendar/entry-5303.html>. Retrieved 2009.

³ Richard Popkin, ed. *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 9.

⁴ (*Discourse on Method and Other Writings*, 32).

⁵ (*Discourse on Method and Other Writings*, 49)

separated the transcendent (the universal) from nature (the particulars). One could only know what was in the religious circle by faith and hence required no justification, while the scientific circle of knowledge boasted of empirical evidence. Added to this was Bacon's fresh vision of science which put science on a new and very successful path.

Lewis Beck quotes 19th century English historian Thomas Macaulay as saying, "Bacon blew the trumpet, and all the wits gathered."⁶ It is Bacon who has enormous influence on the development of science as we know it today and, hence, the development of the industrialized nations. For Bacon, science was to be used by man to regain dominion over creation. Bacon writes: ". . . I (like an honest and faithful guardian) may hand over to men their fortunes, their understanding now liberated and come of age. And from this an improvement of the estate of man is sure to follow and an enlargement of his power over Nature. For man by the Fall fell both from his state of innocence and his dominion over creation. Both of these, however can even in this life be to some extent made good; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and science."⁷ Bacon did not think that his 'new method' would lead to absolute certainty as later many in science would come to believe---a position known as scientism or objectivism. For Bacon, he knew too well that the human mind could make mistakes and needed to be corrected. In fact, he explained the epistemological blind spots through his notion of the *idols of the mind*.

Nonetheless, with Bacon came a new confidence in science by which man's estate on this earth was surely to be improved. It was not, however, an attempt to find a way around God or to suggest there was no need of God, but precisely because there was a God. In fact, Bacon believed that unless one begins at this point of beginning and applies his new method only trifling progress will be made through science. Bacon's fundamental premise was that: "Now the beginning must come from God; for the business in hand, from the excellent quality of goodness in it, is clearly from God, who is the author of goodness and the father of light."⁸ To recognize this is essential.

According to Bacon, it was not just the foundation of science that rested on God, but the continuance of science on a proper path. He wrote: "Let the human race only recover its God-given right over Nature, and be given the necessary power, then right reason and sound religion will govern the exercise of it."⁹

What is instructive about all of this is that we are presently told by any number of people that Christianity destroys science. But, historically this is clearly not the case. If science is the engine of the Enlightenment and Bacon's understanding of nature is what gave rise to science (as Edward O. Wilson claims), then clearly belief in God is not inimical to science. It is the very foundation of science, at least according to Bacon who is a major influence in the success of science. This cannot be denied without doing extreme violence to history. This point could be made by looking at the ontological and epistemological commitments of those such as Kepler, (1571-1630), Boyle (1627-91),

⁶ Lewis Beck, ed. *Philosophies of the 18th Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 3.

⁷ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum: With other Parts of the Great Instauration*, Trans & Eds Peter Urbach and John Gibson, (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 292.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

Newton (1642-1727), Faraday (1791-1867), Mendel (1822-84), Pasteur (1822-95), to name a few, who were theists. In no way did their belief in God hinder their work as scientists and, in fact, many claimed that science confirmed their faith. Melvin Calvin, Nobel Prize winner in biochemistry, claims that the orderly function of the universe is essential for science and notes that the Hebrew-Christian view of the universe being government by a single God “seems to be the historical foundation for modern science.”¹⁰ This is why I claim that the divide between Christianity and science is not one of evidence against God, but one of an *a priori* epistemological and ontological commitment. The epistemological development being that the religious circle of knowledge was gained only by faith without justification and the ontological commitment was that nature was all there was to reality.

Of course, science has brought many good things to humanity for which we are thankful, but that does not demonstrate that God is no longer a necessary part of the equation of reality. However, because of the epistemological foundation laid by Descartes and the success of science on Bacon’s terms, it was assumed (falsely so) that God was not needed, because all that was, was nature. Of course it is understandable given the earlier epistemological divide that it appeared science was a better determiner in truth than was Christianity. Therefore, when Darwin proposed his story of nature, it seemed what science said must be more sure than what Christianity said. With metaphysical naturalism of evolution came the assumption, strangely enough, that the tools of science measured all reality. Once this method of making statements about reality was accepted, it naturally followed that no truth statements could be made apart from science. But, by science’s own admission, the tools of science could not measure the transcendent, but that in no way should lead to the conclusion God does not exist. Remember that the nature of an object determines both what can be known about the object and how the object can be known. Science was good at figuring out nature, but it had no way of demonstrating that God did not exist, it was merely that He was no longer needed. Might I point out, that is a very different matter altogether. Claiming God is not needed is not the same thing as saying He does not exist.

Science tells us how nature behaves as it does. Christianity explains why it is the way it is. In fact, Christianity and science are looking at the same reality, howbeit, different strata of reality (critical realism). Furthermore, belief in the Christian God does not retard either interest in science or skill in doing science. The fact is, that just because science is extremely powerful in explaining how nature works, it does not follow that nature is all there is.

It seems that the influential educator and Darwinian social activist, John Dewey, made the point quite clear that what happened with Charles Darwin was a shift. A shift not of a conflict between science and Christianity, but of what philosophy should determine as important. It was as he says a shift in logic. “... the ‘Origin of Species’ introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of

¹⁰ Melvin Calvin, *Chemical Evolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 258.

knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion.”¹¹ By this, Dewey pointed out this meant that no longer is the interest in who made the world rather it was an interest in what kind of a world it is. This, of course, was the result of the earlier epistemological divide between science and Christianity.

All of this is now reinforced by much of the present day media technology. Technology, a marvelous product of true science, is altering the way we look at reality. As Neil Postman observed: “New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*, they alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in *which* thoughts develop.”¹² This, as well, has reinforced the divide between science and Christianity.

In light of this brief consideration, what is rather obvious is that this divide between science and Christianity has very little, if anything, to do with scientific evidence or methodology. Instead it is the result of a philosophical shift. Once this is understood, it seems that the recent estrangement and even hostility between science and Christianity can sense some healing without either giving up anything essential to its responsibilities and commitments. Science is not a replacement for God, nor is God a replacement for science. Science is yet to prove there is no God or that all reality can be explained in biological/chemical terms. Therefore, rational human beings are fully within their epistemic rights to claim God exists while affirming the merits of science. What is needed is to reverse the epistemological shift of the 17th century where the two epistemological circles are brought back to a proper relationship with each other and to realize the ontological necessity of the transcendent. This will mean, as some are already acknowledging, that science simply cannot speak to all reality because there is more to reality than nature.

¹¹ John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, in *Sources of the American Republic: A Documentary History of Politics, Society, and Thought*, eds Arvin Meyers, John Cawelti and Alexander Kern, vol 2, revised edition (Glenview, ILL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), 208.

¹² Neil Postman. *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 20.